

# Making our digital future work for all women and girls

Priorities from the Global South for the Global Digital Compact

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#### About this submission

The objectives and principles suggested in this document are based on insights gathered within and beyond the Southern Voice network, starting during the COVID-19 pandemic. We include knowledge from the following sources:

**Country-level studies**: Between 2020 and 2021, we worked with research teams in India, Peru, and Tanzania, to understand how rapid digitalization, in response to the pandemic, was impacting countries' ability to deliver key public services to all. <u>These studies</u> sought, in particular, to uncover any unique challenges that women and girls faced in accessing, education, civic spaces, or business support services.

**Sectoral analysis**: Additional analysis was carried out to identify recommendations in the issues of 1) access to digital spaces, 2) online education 3) businesses online and 4) participation in civic spaces online.

**Network consultations:** We gathered 30+ experts for online consultations. These exchanges enabled us to identify, based on emerging consensus, a set of priorities for the digital inclusion of women and girls across the Global South.

**CSW67 consultation:** On the occasion of the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (the priority theme of which revolved around 'innovation and technological change"), we gathered 50+ stakeholders in New York to discuss further priorities emerging from the Global South. Their insights enabled us to further understand specific, global-level challenges preventing meaningful progress towards the objectives we propose.

The present proposal features, after a brief introduction, four objectives that the Global Digital compact could adopt, to achieve a digital future that is "open, free and secure" for all women and girls. In each case, we then propose two to four commitments which we believe may help achieve the suggested objectives. Finally, we offer for consideration three principles, which can, if included in the GDC, support the type of renewed global cooperation necessary for it to achieve its stated mission.

### The digital present for Southern women and girls

With the 4th Industrial Revolution underway and accelerated after the pandemic, global trends indicate an ever-growing reliance on digital technologies, including for the delivery of key public services.

Evidence, however, stresses that this poses significant risks for women and girls across the Global South, who are in many ways restricted in their ability to access, use, participate in, and design our digital present.

The experience of the pandemic, with its movement restrictions shifting many activities, prematurely, into the digital sphere, enabled us to better understand the magnitude of the challenge.

During the time, countless girls were completely cut off from learning, some maintaining no connection at all with their learning environment until schools reopened. Young women in tertiary education, too, accumulated learning delays. Women who own Small-and-Medium-Enterprises (SMEs) – which in many cases are a core source of household income – were very often unable to sustain their operations, and had to shut down, as they were neither able to navigate digital marketplaces to trade remotely (or even maintain relationships with their customer base), or to access government support to businesses. In online civic spaces, expressing oneself often meant, for women defending womens' rights in particular, seeing unleashed waves of uncontrolled abuse.

The pandemic shed a harsh light on the significant exclusion many women and girls across the Global South will face, the further integrated into our societies digital technologies become. This has brought to light new priorities, as well as a renewed urgency to existing calls from numerous Southern advocates for the digital empowerment of women and girls.

There is an urgent need for measures to address this multifaceted digital exclusion, in order to prevent our digital future from furthering the political and economic exclusion of women and girls, and drastically reversing progress made towards gender equality.

### What can the Global Digital Compact do?

The Global Digital Compact aims to lay the ground for an open, free and secure digital future for all. In doing so, it can set out shared principles and objectives that governments, private sector and civil society should adhere to.

The research conducted by Southern Voice suggests the GDC could include:

- 1) Four objectives, addressing key aspects of the digital exclusion that many women and girls across the Global South currently face
- 2) Three cross-cutting and interdependent principles that support the objectives outlined before.

### **Objectives**

### Objective 1: Enable universal access to ICTs

Today, an individual's ability to access public online spaces is largely contingent upon this individual's private and household means.

For many women and girls across the Global South, the cost of a digital device, and a home connection and/or mobile data plan, are unaffordable. Some are completely disconnected from digital spaces, having never before used the internet. For others, usage may be sporadic, and limited to basic features allowed by the cheapest smartphones available – which won't, for example, enable quality online learning, or conducting business through digital marketplaces.

In addition, poor network quality and sometimes lacking electrical access are additional barriers, particularly in rural areas.

In order to open up the digital space to everyone, we suggest that the Global Digital Compact include these commitments:

 Policies and partnerships should be put in place to provide an affordable internet connection to all. This may involve free access for students who need it, measures to reduce tax on internet plans, regulatory changes to further enable local action, or designing new data plans suitable for those who are paid on a daily, weekly or fortnightly basis.

- In order to unlock some of the required investments, universal access funds should be utilized, framed within social inclusion policies.
- Public spaces, such as libraries, community centers, should be leveraged to provide free-of-charge internet access, as well as necessary support, to those who need it.
- Significant investment will be needed to ensure the provision of internet services to vast rural areas. This involves developing an adequate electrical and IT architecture, which will require global support in the form of tailored financing instruments.

## Objective 2: Equip women and girls with the skills needed to be full and equal beneficiaries and co-creators of the digital future

The unequal opportunities that women and girls, across the Global South, have to develop the skills that would enable them to be full and equal participants of our digital future, was particularly noted in two areas. On one end, there is an urgent need to provide them with an equal opportunity to forge the basic digital skills required to navigate online spaces. On the other, measures need to enable more women and girls to be part of the creation of our digital future, by addressing the barriers that maintain a strong gender divide in IT-related higher education programmes.

Digital literacy is becoming increasingly crucial to access even basic services – a trend accelerated during the pandemic, and unlikely to radically change course. We observed that an individual's ability to effectively use digital technologies was a determining factor in one's ability to keep up with learning, conduct business, participate in political activity, or even access critical government support, in times of crisis.

Overall, across the Global South, women and girls are less likely than men and boys to possess basic digital literacy. They are, indeed, less likely to be exposed to digital

technologies from a young age, or to be regularly using digital devices. Where devices may exist in the household, disproportionate care responsibilities mean that many will have limited time, if any, to become familiar with their use.

This divide persists through higher levels of education, with boys often being favored over girls for IT disciplines – as the higher cost of these degrees implies a choice for many low-and-middle-income households. IT skills and tools are also often deemed to be for boys and men. This in turn creates a divide in terms of who is designing our digital present and future, whose knowledge is driving it, whose needs are driving the solutions being conceived.

In order to proactively address these obstacles, we suggest that the Global Digital Compact include commitments around the following areas.

- In addition to measures supporting universal access to the internet, countries should include in their plans the development of basic digital skills for all into the primary and secondary school curriculum, as well as the adequate upgrading of school facilities
- Many of the women lacking digital literacy are not currently enrolled in education. To remedy this, governments may partner with private companies to put in place needs-based training programmes, to foster the development of basic digital literacy, as well as an understanding of the ways to use digital platforms to, for example, support business activity.
- Initiatives that support and incentivise more women and girls to enroll in IT-related degrees should be designed through collaborative efforts of governments and relevant private sector stakeholders.

## Objective 3: Implement a people-centered regulatory framework to protect users from all forms of online violence

During the pandemic, more people entered the digital space. This led to a net increase in tech-enabled abuse, and provided evidence of the far-reaching impacts of an inadequately regulated online space.

Women are either being pushed out of or silenced in key spaces. Activism shifted online during this time. Yet the extent of violent, often sexually explicit attacks perpetrated on women, in particular women choosing to speak up about womens' rights often, deters very necessary advocates from promoting change. The presence of known abusers within online learning spaces also deterred many women and girls from joining or participating in online classes.

Impacts can also be seen in the physical realm. Concerns over data protection may, for example, deter victims of domestic abuse from using reporting services, or even owning a smartphone, due to fear of location services being used to track them.

Limited definitions, limited scope of existing national-level legislation, as well as conflicts between countries' digital regulatory frameworks foster an environment with little accountability for the harm perpetrated online. The trans-national reach, and thus impact, of the most commonly used digital platforms requires a strong, context-sensitive, global regulatory framework protecting individuals over the interests of digital companies, without discrimination.

Across the Global South, language remains a key obstacle to effectively protecting populations against tech-enabled abuse. Indeed, the tools put in place by digital companies to prevent the use, for example, of hate speech are not consistently developed to protect users in all languages.

The digital future won't be secure for all, failing the provision of strong regulation that effectively addresses, across borders, the threats to women and girls' safety and wellbeing online. This also means that many women will likely self-select out of digital spaces. In order to meaningfully strengthen safety online, we suggest that the Global Digital Compact include commitments around the following areas.

• Most online platforms are international in nature. As such, national-level regulation is insufficient to protect women and girls everywhere. Examples have shown that national regulations, in particular protecting technological companies, may directly prevent other countries from protecting their own citizens. The GDC provides an opportunity to define a strong global regulatory framework for protection against gender-based cybercrime. This

framework should be based upon an equitable negotiation process that centers the voices and concerns of marginalized women and other vulnerable targeted groups. Adequate accountability measures should be included, to address a common deficit in the implementation of existing policies.

- The regulatory frameworks curtailing abuse online lack precise definitions of the various types of online violence that have emerged. Without these definitions, legislation will fail to account for the various ways in which one can perpetrate harm online, and adequately protect would-be victims. Existing forms of tech-enabled online abuse, such as online sexual harassment, need to be defined at a global level, and appropriately integrated into national and local-level understandings and policies regarding cybercrime.
- Where tools, such as filters, are created to protect users from online abuse, it is essential that adequate investment is made into their effective translation in all languages.

### Objective 4: Develop indicators that reflect the reality of various extents of digital exclusion

At this time, the indicators that we use to track the digital divide are rudimentary. They neither account for significant differences in digital access between groups, or for the quality of one's online experience.

Internet penetration alone does not signify a population's access to online spaces. Furthermore, measures of access do not equate to regular access for sustained periods of time, or the ability to meaningfully use digital technologies. The indicators created and used to track the digital divide should account for the ways in which they create an opportunity gap – for example, in ability to learn, to do business, to benefit from government services, online.

The digital divide is also determined by many disparities existing outside of the strict realm of technology. It is mediated by income, gender, socio-economic status, geographical location, among others. There is therefore a need for the data that we capture to be significantly disaggregated, to enable a targeted, rapid response to evolutions in the digital divide.

More precise vulnerability mapping is needed to understand with precision the needs of those left behind in all aspects of fair and equal digital participation.

In order to ensure that digital inequity is adequately understood, and that mitigating policies are based on meaningful evidence, we suggest that the Global Digital Compact include commitments around the following areas:

- New, adequate indicators of the digital divide need to be designed at the global level. To do so, the global statistical community should draw on local expertise on the different dimensions of exclusion.
- Evidence from the pandemic should also be used to establish minimum requirements for a digital experience that provides every individual an equal opportunity to learn, conduct business, participate in political activity, among other key activities. These requirements will include indicators related to connectivity, device type, electrical connection, access time, and others informed by evidence.
- While such new indicators will reflect the current reality of digital exclusion, provisions should explicitly be made for a monitoring and evaluation framework, at the global level, to be regularly reviewed, to ensure that it reflects emerging and future challenges.

### Suggested principles

In order for all commitments of the Global Digital Compact to support the establishment of an open, free, and secure digital future for all, we suggest that the principles it will be based upon include:

#### Reach the furthest behind first

The GDC can reinforce the principle to reach the furthest behind first that member states have already committed to in the 2030 Development Agenda declaration. In the digital space, this principle would ensure that all actions focused on those entirely excluded from digital spaces now. This is essential because the rapid pace of progress means that, each day of inaction, the gaps in opportunities between those with and without access keeps growing.

### **Public accountability**

The digital future will most likely continue to be a private and public endeavor. The objectives of the GCD will be at risk if innovations, investments are not accountable to the public. Member states can commit to including stronger accountability mechanisms across the actions outlined in the GDC.

### Consistency

In order for global digital transformation to support, rather than threaten, global efforts towards key sustainable development goals, member states can commit to sustaining overall consistency between the policies driving digital development, across sectors, between countries, and through successive political administrations.

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#### **About Southern Voice**

First formed in 2013, <u>Southern Voice</u> is now a dynamic network of 66 think tanks based across Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Through our research, advocacy and outreach initiatives, we aim to redress the knowledge asymmetry that still pervades much of global development debates.

We therefore work to center, within ongoing political processes and discussions at the global level, key perspectives from the Global South. To do so, we actively harness the collective knowledge contained across our member think tanks and others in the Global South.

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